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## Major funding boost for Tasmanian dementia and obesity research

Keeping people out of hospital and improving long-term community health will be the focus of \$2.4 million in federal funding received by leading University of Tasmania health researchers today.

Focusing on community health in North West Tasmania, the research will address two of the biggest global social and health issues – dementia and increasing rates of obesity.

“Rural and regional communities in Tasmania have among the highest rates of chronic illness,” project co-lead Professor James Vickers from the Wicking Dementia Research and Education Centre said.

“The project will focus on the North West and promote self-management of factors related to chronic illness and complex disorders, which in the long run will reduce avoidable hospital visits.”

“North West Tasmania is an ideal ‘test bed’ to develop preventative health strategies that are relevant and scalable to other Australian rural and regional communities.”

On the dementia front, the project aims to increase community education around modifiable risks for dementia, through participation in the Wicking Centre’s Preventing Dementia Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and community-led programs.

Professor Vickers said while Tasmania’s ageing community was set to lead to substantial increases in the number of people with dementia, there were some risks that could be managed.

“Age is the most substantial risk factor for dementia, and Tasmania is the ‘oldest’ State or territory in Australia, with approximately one-fifth of the population over the age of 65,” he said.

“But it is increasingly recognised that there are also several potentially modifiable factors, including maintaining good vascular health and mental stimulation, that can affect risk of dementia.”

School of Health Sciences researcher and world obesity expert Professor Andrew Hills will lead the obesity component of the project.

The research will focus on the prevention of obesity through physical activity and improved eating behaviours, particularly during the 'critical' age periods of adolescence, preconception and pregnancy, infancy and childhood.

"Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the Tasmanian context with disproportionate levels in the North and North-West," Professor Hills said.

"Obesity during the growing years has the potential to affect health, educational attainment and quality of life."

The project aims to take a community approach to influencing the next generation by working initially with mothers, babies and young children.

"This work will involve a wide range of health professionals in various settings, educators, parents and in partnership with all levels of government, non-government and community organisations," Professor Hills said.

The new projects encompass the College of Health and Medicine's research flagships - dementia and obesity.

Funding for the project is under the Federal Government's Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Keeping Australians Out of Hospital grant program.

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